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ABSTRACT

This is the first issue of the "Equal Opportunity Review." The purpose of the publication is to provide opinion and information to educators and laymen interested in furthering equal educational opportunities in our society. To inaugurate this series, Dr. Doxey A. Wilkerson, an eminent educator and advocate of equal educational opportunity for several decades, was interviewed. Dr. Wilkerson is Professor of Education at the Ferkauf Graduate School of Yeshiva University. He was a professor in several black colleges and universities for many years and is now involved mainly in the preparation of teachers for effectively working with children of the poor. The interview includes discussions of the following questions: Which of a complex of influences in-school and out-of-school contributing to the widespread retardation and high dropout rates among children of the poor are most critical? If teachers would only teach, would disadvantaged children learn effectively? Within the context of a school system whose priorities are wrong and whose administration is at fault in this, what can we expect of a teacher? What changes are of special importance in improving the quality of education for children of the poor? What role should black and Hispanic studies play in the education of children in our city? (Author/JM)

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY REVIEW

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This is the first issue of the **Equal Opportunity Review.** *The purpose of the publication is to provide opinion and information to educators and laymen interested in furthering equal educational opportunity in our society. Issues will appear approximately ten times a year. The punched holes in the left-hand margin are an invitation to collect and retain copies of this publication.*

To inaugurate this series, we have interviewed Dr. Doxey A. Wilkerson, an eminent educator and advocate of equal educational opportunity for several decades, to talk about some of his concerns.

Dr. Doxey A. Wilkerson is Professor of Education at the Ferkauf Graduate School of Yeshiva University. He was a professor in several black colleges and universities for many years, and is now involved mainly in the preparation of teachers for effectively working with children of the poor.

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The Poor: A Problem of Priority

An Interview with Dr. Doxey A. Wilkerson

by William A. Katz

Interviewer: It seems clear that a complex of influences in-school and out-of-school contribute to the widespread retardation and high dropout rates among children of the poor. Which one or two of these influences is most critical?

DW: As a teacher of education, my temptation is to answer in terms of methods we use in teaching in school and curriculum content, and they are important. There are instructional procedures, experiences for children, that make for effective learning and others which do not. But when you ask about what is *most* important, I think we need to move to the affective realm of relationships among people and the values that they hold. To illustrate: As I've observed effective teachers of disadvantaged children and ineffective teachers of disadvantaged children, what stands out most prominently is the quality of relationships between teacher and students. The teacher who makes it evident that she regards a youngster as an important human being, perhaps even has affection for him and surely respects him as a person, is able to get responses which the teacher who tends to alienate cannot get. No matter how good the techniques, if the human relations element is not optimum, there will not be optimum learning. And I'm inclined to think that teachers who establish that kind of human relations are very likely to be teachers who will also take care of the methods which are required, because their concern for the youngster will necessitate their seeking effective ways of reaching him and helping him to develop.

Even beyond the individual teacher, though, I think it's necessary to comment upon the social climate in which education proceeds and its impact on the schools. Quite clearly, our schools are not independent agencies; they are interacting parts of an integral culture, and a highly dependent part of that culture; and they are decisively influenced by the values that prevail outside the school. If those societal values placed a premium on human development, then I'm sure this would be clearly reflected in the values we place on human development in our schools. But in a society where development for hundreds of thousands of young people is being truncated in their impoverished homes and communities, the same tends to prevail in the schools.

In a society where we tend to devalue the poor—"they are really not important"—what we see in our schools, is in large measure a reflection of what we see outside of our schools. In our society we know very well how to mobilize our resources to achieve priority goals: putting a man on the moon, waging an ill advised war in Viet Nam, or whatever it may be. We know how to bring people together and focus on achieving our goal. But the education of masses of poor children apparently is not a priority goal in our society. Their development is not a priority goal, and that being so in the society as a whole negatively influences our operations within the school.

It is important to note, however, that there are schools where a high premium *is* placed on human development, where the whole tone of the school bespeaks respect for the personality of the people involved. In such schools learning for the poor goes on effectively. Not many schools in which the poor pupils predominate are characterized by such values and

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such attitudes, due in large measure to the lack of concern or racist attitudes, or anti-poor prejudices in the school—largely reflections of values that dominate our society at large. The ultimate resolution of the question, of course, must be whatever it takes to make the values of our society give priority to human development rather than, let us say, corporate profits.

It has been said that if a teacher would only teach, disadvantaged children would learn effectively. Do you agree?

Yes and no. Fundamentally, yes. When teachers use effective means in guiding the learning of their youngsters, they learn; and that's what I mean by good teaching. But there are many reasons why children do not learn which are not in the command of teachers. Some are outside the school itself: children who are hungry, for example, regularly are not normally effective learners, and many of the children of the poor are hungry. Also teachers are products of their own developmental experiences. I used to be a teacher-baiter, and to say flatly that if they would only teach them they would learn; but I've come to think that most teachers *want* their children to learn, that they're frustrated when children don't learn. Now, I know that there are many teachers who really are not concerned, and some who are overtly racist; but I think they are a minority in the profession. All teachers, however, are influenced by the setting in which they work. They are part of an organization, the school, whose policies, characteristics, and atmosphere affect *them;* and while individual teachers do not set that atmosphere, they are very largely influenced by it.

I think of a school, for example, in which a principal was strongly motivated by humanistic values. He knew every kid by name; they used to run up to him and grab him when he went down the corridors. He had visited the home of every child in that school. He was in rapport with the community. He set a tone in the school that said these children were important—"It is our job to see that they learn"—and tried to facilitate teachers in their efforts creatively to tackle the problem furthering their achievement. Teachers in such a school situation are more likely to succeed in teaching than in another kind of school where the general expectation set by the principal is that "we don't expect much of them," "Keep them off the walls;" and where teachers are expected to follow a rigidly prescribed course of study—no variations, no innovations. A teacher in this latter kind of situation, I think, will function very differently from a teacher in a school where there is a climate of humaneness and the expectation of and obligation to assure academic growth.

What I'm saying then is "yes," if teachers would teach effectively, children of the poor generally will learn. But there are many things that the school organization and the school system do that affect the success with which a teacher can teach effectively. Many teachers who go into the classroom with idealistic purposes and big plans before long become socialized into the patterns of neglect and non-expectation that prevail in the school. It's not enough just to say if the teachers would teach, the kids would learn. Something must be done to that whole school climate and the atmosphere; the values that tend to prevail in that school necessarily affect the behaviors of individual teachers.

Within the context of a school system whose priorities are wrong and whose administration is at fault in this, what can we expect of a teacher?

My response to the previous question might seem to have implied a blanket negative expectation of what teachers might do unless we fix up all the things around them. But there are, even in less than optimum school situations, opportunities for the teacher who really wants to do an effective job. In many communities around the country there are teachers who have reputations of being "effective teachers of the disadvantaged" in schools where there is little concern. At Yeshiva University, several years ago, we had a two-day conference of some two dozen such teachers, all of whom had been identified as effective teachers of the disadvantaged. In most of their schools their colleagues were not doing an effective job, but *they* were. The fact that there are such teachers shows that within her classroom the teacher does have a large measure of autonomy, and that the individual teacher, if so motivated, can make a difference with pupils, even in an undesirable school situation. There are many schools in which pupils in one teacher's class are growing academically and in personality development, whereas pupils in other teachers' classes in the same school are not. This fact suggests that the initiative, the concern, the values of the individual teacher can make a difference even within an overall bad school situation.

Would that we had thousands and thousands of individual teachers showing the initiative, values and concerns that I'm talking about! Then we wouldn't be discussing this problem. But we *don't* have them. How to get most teachers, rather than a score or a few hundred to do what the able teacher with initiative and concern does is the big problem, but it should not becloud the fact that the individual teacher *can,* even in less than optimal situations, do an effective job if he will.

Just what changes do you think of special importance in improving the quality of education for children of the poor?

Fundamentally, in a long-time perspective, changing the quality of society, of course, is the most important thing that could be done. But that raises political questions and perspectives which I don't think your question is intended to raise. Within the framework of our educational enterprise as it is, it would seem to me that there are several ways by which we could get leverage on the problem: one, of course, is in teacher education—both pre-service education and especially in-service education. Our teacher education institutions and programs should be dominated in the first place by a humanistic philosophy, which is not now true, especially with reference to the education of teachers of the poor. Instead, we find our teacher education institutions falling into the trap of biological or sociological determinism, giving teachers all the reasons in the world why these kids can't learn, and not much emphasis upon the values which we should be cherishing and trying to realize, and on the demonstrated potential of children of the poor to learn if provided with appropriate learning experiences. We need teacher education programs that prepare teachers for the real world they face, that try to develop not only insight but empathy with the children of the poor and poor people generally, that encourage flexible and adaptable programs of curriculum development rather than following the pre-packaged programs set forth in courses of

study. I think that more vital teacher education programs can do a great deal. They're not adequate in themselves, because a well prepared teacher can back-track in an unhappy school situation. But I think this is one of the approaches within our command that could improve the quality of education for children of the poor.

A second has to do with the question of school atmosphere, stemming in large measure from administrative leadership. As I see many of our schools operating, there isn't much creative leadership coming from the people who should provide it. I'm thinking of principals particularly. A principal can set the tone for a school. He can relieve a frustrated teacher of many of the problems that confront him. He can give a new teacher experiences with other teachers and elsewhere that will help with the problems he faces. He can discourage a tendency to write these children off as "uneducable," and insist upon trying to find answers to approaches that will enable them to learn effectively. The character of the administrative leadership with reference to curriculum development, teaching methods and the values complex is crucial. The U.S. Commissioner of Education once called upon the profession to solve the mystery of bringing learning to the children of the poor, implying that we don't know how to do it. This, of course, is not true. There are within the New York City School System hundreds of teachers who are doing an effective job of teaching the poor. Across the country there must be thousands. It is the responsibility of the school administrator to set a tone and afford assistance that will promote teacher behaviors conducive to effective learning. His message should be: "These children are educable; this is demonstrable. Given appropriate learning experiences, they learn. It is your responsibility as a teacher to devise methods and materials and classroom experiences that result in effective learning. And my responsibility as an administrator is to help you in every way I can."

The development of such approaches to educational leadership are to some extent within our control in the profession, and they would make a big difference.

A third suggestion concerns the relations of school and home. It's long been apparent to me that we won't win in the school, in any school, and particularly the schools for the poor, if we don't have the support of the home. Many schoolmen and women recognize that too, but they take a position different from mine. I've heard teachers and school administrators say, for example, that if parents of poor children were interested they would support us in getting something done with these children, but they really don't care. They seem to assume that parental support should be given the school as a matter of right. One might ask whether such support is not a value to be won. Support of the home and of the community is something that we educators have a right to expect only if we've demonstrated that we merited it. The alienation of schools from homes in poor communities is the norm. Rarely do teachers know anything about the parents of children whom they tend to characterize as "culturally deprived" non-learners. Only minimally, through more or less ineffective parent/teacher associations, do we make any effort to involve parents in the educative process. All of this tends to make almost inevitable the hiatus that now exists between school and community.

My hope and expectation is that a closing of this gap will come from the whole movement for community controlled schools—after we've ironed out many of its bugs. Effectively functioning community control will give the community a sense that the school is *their* school; that they (or their representatives) know the people there, and are interacting with them; that they're welcome in the school and respected when they go there. When real power is placed in the hands of communities to determine school budget, program, policy and personnel, this will perforce lead the profession to a different—and more constructive—posture towards the people of poor communities, and toward their children. I think that whatever method, whether it be through teacher visitation of homes, which I have found to be an extremely important approach, or through a really functional pattern of community control, or through other means, it is absolutely essential to establish rapport between home and school. This is one of the very crucial changes necessary for improving the quality of education of children of the poor.

What role do you think black and Hispanic studies should play in the education of children in our city?

Well, in our school system where black and Hispanic children constitute a majority of the population, by all means, it would seem to me these studies should play a very important role. But I don't want to restrict it to minority group pupils. In our country as a whole, real values for all children are to be realized by incorporating into the curriculum experiences that lead to an understanding and appreciation of our different cultural groups. The values are several. The first concerns the minority group child who tends not to feel at home in a school situation where faculty and administrative leadership are predominantly of a different cultural or racial background. If the curriculum experiences involve him and all of the children in the school in some study and appreciation of developments peculiar to his cultural background, this provides *him* a sense of validity, of belonging. This shows respect for his background, and hence for respecting him; and with it, of course, goes some strengthening of his own ego.

I often think of a school several years ago in which a teacher had placed a picture of a black nationalist leader on the bulletin board, and a little black youngster came up and said, "Miss Hill, is he colored?" It was quite obvious that he was a black man. Why did he ask the question? I suspect because he had learned that events concerning blacks just are not important. There would be nothing strange about the picture of a black man on the bulletin board. So also with Hispanic studies. If *all* children in our schools studied about the history and culture of minority peoples, that might lead to heightened respect for people who are different, and it would certainly tend to strengthen the self-concept of the minority group child.

I think this also would make a contribution towards the overall struggle against racism in our society. I'm not suggesting that the roots of racism are ignorance; they're much more fundamental than that. However, ignorance tends to abet racist tendencies and misunderstandings. Information alone won't suffice to get rid of the prejudices with which our society is rife, but information and values which go along with that information from the schools can make an important contribution. It is possible in schools to make real progress towards having all children respect the cultures of other

children if we consciously attempt to do so. And of course black and Hispanic studies are a medium by which that might be furthered.

Then, too, the inclusion of such studies would give all children a truer, more valid interpretation of the history of our country and of the nature of our society. I'm thinking of black history particularly. I do not see any black history apart from American history. I don't think there can be any real understanding of the experiences of black people in this country except as it's tied up with the whole development of American society. On the other hand, I don't think there's any valid American history which tends to leave out the important roles at every stage of development that the black people have played in that development. What we tend to do in our schools is to distort our own history by neglecting the experiences of the minority groups within the society. This is perhaps most flagrant with reference to blacks and people of Spanish background, but also with some of the other ethnic minorities. We get a more valid understanding of our society and its historical development when black studies and Hispanic studies become a normal, integrated part of the educational program.

A video tape of the above interview is available on a 30 day loan basis for a mailing charge of $1.50. Orders must be prepaid. Make checks payable to Teachers College, Columbia University. Mail orders to NCRIEEO, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York 10027

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